

Using Theory-Based Accountability to Support Improvements in Children's Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

During the past fifteen years, efforts have been made throughout the United States to develop cohesive and effective service delivery strategies for children with serious emotional disturbance and their families. Three major influences can be identified in this regard. First, and perhaps most significant, is the move to meet the needs and strengths of children and families through the development of community-based systems of services and supports often referred to as systems of care (Stroul and Friedman, 1986; Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs 1989; Friesen & Koroloff 1990; Duchnowski and Friedman, 1990). Systems of care are designed to provide community-based, culturally competent, individualized, family-centered services for children with serious emotional disturbance (Stroul and Friedman, 1986). The expectation is that systems of care can meet the unique needs of diverse communities while adapting to the complex and constantly changing conditions that characterize current service delivery environments.

A second influence is the growing expectation that systems and programs should be accountable for the results of their service delivery (Hernandez 2000). As a result, mental health service providers across the country are facing increasing pressure to demonstrate the short- and long-term results of their work with children and families. The focus on results-based accountability has generated hope that community-based service systems will respond more flexibly to service needs, more effectively support children and families and restore public trust in the ability of human services to accomplish their intended purposes (Schorr, Farrow, and Hornbeck, et al 1994). The third influence is that an increasing value is being placed on the integration of multiple perspectives, including those of providers, funders and particularly family members, in the planning and delivery of children's mental health services (Whitbeck 1993; VanDenBerg 1992).

Taken together these trends point towards a vision for children's mental health services based on the establishment of well-integrated systems of community-based services and supports that are developed and sustained through the input of multiple stakeholders and are accountable to those stakeholders for the results of their efforts. The reality of developing such systems of care, however, is that complexity, the rapid pace of change

and the enormity of the system development task can challenge even the most inspired and willing advocates for reform. Because of these challenges, participants at all levels of systems of care can benefit from a tool to help link ideas for how a system should be built to specific strategies that can be implemented.

Friedman (1996) suggests that given all of the changes and challenges to the field of children's mental health since the early 1980s, there needs to be discussion about the theory underlying systems of care, yet such discussion has been limited. That is, there is little talk about what is thought to be required to bring about positive change in children and youth with serious emotional disturbances. There has also been limited discussion about what features of individualized care are necessary for change to occur and how changes at the system level of service planning and management impact on the quality and/or effectiveness of services.

BACKGROUND

A well-functioning collaboration among agencies and with families is a necessary ingredient to successful systems of care, but developing these systems requires more than strong collaboration. It requires establishing clear links between the **ideas** for how a system should be built and the **chosen strategies** for creating positive change and support for children and their families (Friedman 1997). Stakeholders engaged in systems of care development can benefit from a theory-based approach to planning and implementation because this approach helps make explicit the links between the ideas concerning service strategies that are believed to work best and the manner in which these ideas are implemented. Additionally, theory-based approaches promote the use of a planning process grounded in information about the local populations to be served. In this way, planning is carried out in response to the identified strengths and needs of populations within the context of the characteristics of the community in which they live, rather than being driven by the implementation of service models that have no link to local needs and strengths.

A significant challenge to building systems based on local needs and strengths is that community efforts to build systems of care are frequently driven by efforts to secure adequate funding for service development. Although funding proposals often make a case for the importance of system development within the community, funding recipients often feel pressured to begin offering services immediately because the need for community-based services is so great and the expectations from funders for implementation is high. This results in shortcutting the conceptualization and operationalization of system development efforts in favor of action.

Shortcuts to service implementation may be enticing, but there are pitfalls to moving so quickly. The short-term advantage of premature implementation of services can be countered by long-term consequences such as difficulty as the incomplete development of collaboration among participating agencies or establishing whether resources being expended are producing the intended benefits. It is difficult for a clear articulation of system expectations within the local context to occur in the absence of adequate planning and consensus building that result in. Julian (1997, p. 254) has noted that, “Efforts to address human services issues are often described as fragmented, duplicative, and uncoordinated.” In addition, such premature service implementation makes systems of care difficult to evaluate since it may be impossible to describe what is being evaluated. Theory-based approaches can assist in system development that addresses these issues and increases the ability of evaluators to link accomplishments with implemented strategies.

Parallel to the growth in systems of care is an increased pressure for accountability. Service systems and their programs are experiencing an increasing demand from family members, funding agents, and other stakeholders for greater accountability as well as the expectation to demonstrate that expended resources are producing benefits (Rouse, Toprac & MacCabe, 1998; Koch, Lewis, & McCall, 1998). The current trend in building accountability in children’s mental health services is to select indicators from familiar measures such as the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) (Hodges, 1996) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1991) or to

generate a list of performance measures specific to a program or service system being evaluated. Neither of these results-based approaches has been satisfactory because both fail to anchor the selected measures in a context of information about the populations being served or the services provided that will facilitate later utilization (Hodges and Hernandez, 1998).

It is difficult to interpret the results of service delivery or promote accountability if outcome information is not considered in the context of additional information that allows stakeholders to know whether services are being offered to the intended population as planned. Although this additional information is not about outcomes per se, it can be considered as outcome-relevant because it provides contextual information about populations served and services provided that is useful in interpreting outcomes. In contrast, results-based accountability tends to be very focused on selection and tracking of specific indicators, and is often implemented in the absence of a thoughtful process of identifying essential information apart from outcomes that could later allow agencies and programs to interpret and utilize evaluation results. Without making this linkage explicit, understanding of the results of service delivery remains fragmented, and planners and implementers are unable to use outcome information in ways that support improved service planning and delivery.

Building systems of care is increasingly linked with efforts to engage a broad base of stakeholders in the development process. Stakeholder involvement is believed to be crucial to building collaboration (Hodges, Nesman and Hernandez 1998), ensuring cultural competence (Hernandez, Isaacs, Nesman, and Burns 1998), engaging families as full partners (Hodges, Nesman and Hernandez 1999), and developing systems that are truly responsive to community needs and strengths. However, integrating multiple perspectives in the planning and implementation of service systems presents the unique challenge of building consensus from a broad range of underlying beliefs and assumptions that are deeply held and may be in conflict with one another. Building real consensus requires an investment of time. The temptation to avoid this conflict by glossing over differences and moving directly to service implementation, however, puts

systems in danger of implementing services prematurely and without adequate linkage to the larger system and its evaluation. Theory-based approaches to planning are effective strategies that evaluators can use for building consensus among diverse stakeholder groups and for developing a clear link between ideas and action.

In contrast to results-based accountability strategies, a theory-based approach anchors selected measures within their broader context. It has been pointed out that understanding this context, that is, its assumed theory and its implementation are important aspects of a quality evaluation (Shern, Trochim & LaComb, 1995; Chen & Rossi, 1983). Weiss (1995) suggests that the concept of grounding evaluations in theories of change is based on the assumption that most complex social programs are based on a theory or belief about how and why the program will work, whether or not the theory has been made explicit. Weiss recommends that evaluation can have the role of helping program implementers articulate this theory and define the assumptions built into their approach. According to Friedman (1997), unless this is accomplished, an evaluation will have difficulty showing whether results are due to a program's failure or to failure in implementing a program as expected. Using a theory-based approach, stakeholders are guided to examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions through which they link intended outcomes with strategies for achieving those outcomes. That is, they are encouraged to focus on why they assume that certain services or policies will lead to positive changes in the population of children and families served. Moreover, a theory-based approach requires stakeholders to link the intended results of service delivery to their organizational mission, so that the integrity of the relationship between the mission and the intended results is maintained.

UNDERSTANDING A THEORY OF CHANGE

A theory of change is the articulation of the underlying beliefs and assumptions that guide a service delivery strategy and are believed to be critical for producing change and improvement in children and families (Hernandez, Hodges, and Worthington, 2000). A theory of change can also be defined as the beliefs that funding agencies, planners, and

implementers have about what children and their families need and what strategies will enable them to meet those needs.

A clearly articulated theory of change provides the foundation for stakeholders to clearly express their expectations and come to agreement on activities that will contribute substantially to meeting those expectations. Articulating a theory of change often presents challenges because program planners and other stakeholders have not examined the underlying assumptions of the services they provide (Connell, et al., 1992).

Establishing a theory of change for a system or program requires planners and implementers at all levels to examine their own assumptions about appropriate and effective strategies and practices and to discuss these assumptions with others engaged in the theory-development process. True consensus regarding the theory of change cannot be reached in the absence of such discussions. The potential benefit of this process is that individuals at all levels of a system or program become more consistent in the delivery of services and supports.

During the development of a theory of change, disagreement among stakeholders frequently surfaces. The process of articulating a unified theory of change serves the useful purpose of highlighting points that require agreement. It is essential that stakeholders become aware of these differences as the first step in building consensus for both short and long range planning.

Components of a Theory of Change

A theory of change has two broad components. The first component involves conceptualizing and operationalizing three elements: the population of focus for services, the strategies believed to lead to desired outcomes and the outcomes that are intended to be accomplished. The second component involves building an understanding of the relationship among the three elements and clearly expressing those relationships

The process of conceptualizing and operationalizing the first element, population of focus, includes understanding issues and strengths associated with the population to be served as well as issues and strengths in the service system and community that affect the

receipt of services. Being clear about who you intend to serve helps to both establish goals and to later interpret the meaning of outcome information. Within the population element there are two categories to consider. The first is information that allows a service system to know whether it has served who it intends to serve. The second is information about other child and family characteristics that may differentially influence selected outcomes regardless of the success of the services delivered. Knowing the population you are intending to serve helps to interpret the meaning of outcome information. For example, a service or program must understand who it has served relative to who it intended to serve in order to interpret outcome information. For example, Friedman (1997) states that a system of care is more important for children and youths with serious emotional problems who require multiple services than for children and youths with less serious problems or for children and youth who require only a single service. To conceptualize and operationalize the population of focus, it is also important to identify child and family characteristics that may influence selected outcomes. In addition to knowing the intended population, it is critical to understand how differences in characteristics impact outcomes. Examining factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, reading level, or history of delinquency, for example, may make it possible to see different patterns of outcome achievement in subgroups of the targeted population.

The second element in a theory of change is the identification and description of strategies and activities believed to be essential for creating positive change or support for children and families. The initial step in conceptualizing and operationalizing strategies is to express the guiding principles supporting the overall strategy. As strategies are articulated, they should be checked against the guiding principles to ensure the commitment to the essence of the effort is supported and maintained. Within this second element, stakeholders identify the types of services or supports, as well as characteristics of those services or supports that they believe are critical to the effectiveness of the strategy. These characteristics can include specifications for the intensity, duration, and frequency of services, the location of services, or their sequencing and integrity. Defining and describing service strategies in sufficient detail and integrity

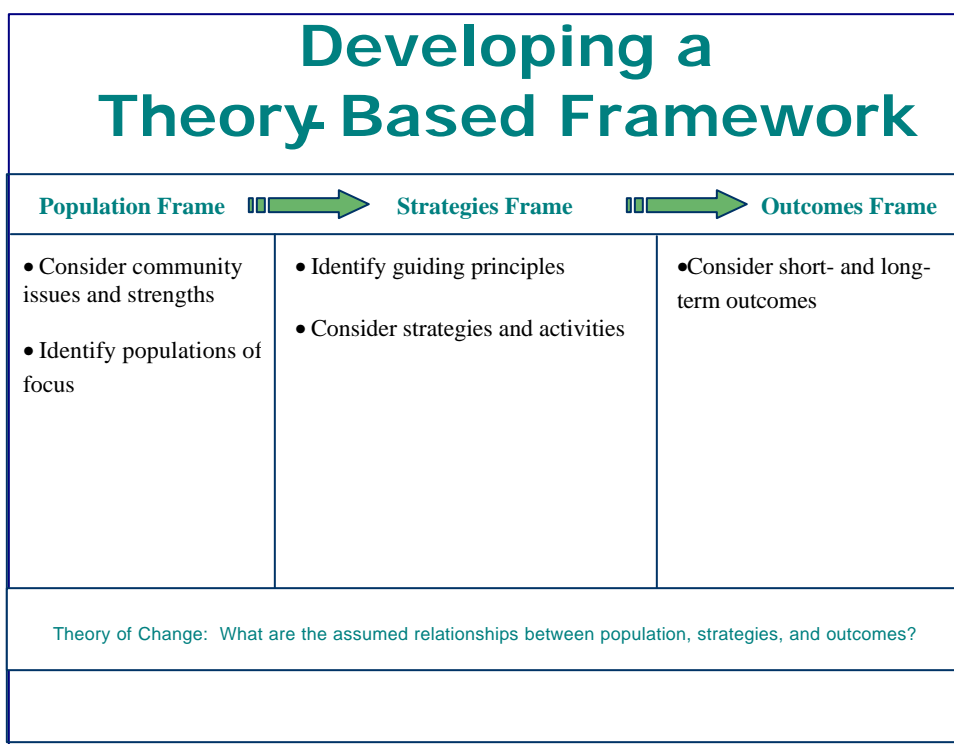
is difficult to do as the field of children's mental health moves from relatively uni-dimensional interventions of a clinical nature to more complex, multidimensional interventions that might occur across different settings and involve multiple professionals and informal sources of support (Friedman 1997). However, it may be that this more complex approach is what is related to effective services. In spite of the challenges of identifying the essential elements of a multidimensional intervention, it is an important step, since it is impossible to later understand the meaning of evaluation results if a clear understanding of what was offered to children and their families has not been developed.

The third element of a theory of change involves the selection of outcomes and their indicators. In a theory of change, outcomes refer to the expected or desired impact of services or strategies. Although there is no requisite number of outcomes to be identified, this element should include both short and long term outcomes. It is important that identified outcomes reflect the issues and strengths of the population of focus and that they be tied to identified strategies. In selecting outcomes, it is important to ensure that they will be later useful for service planning and improvement. Stakeholders need to be realistic about the program's ability to influence certain outcomes by considering other potential influences. In the initial process of selecting outcomes, stakeholders should not be concerned if they are measurable or how they will be measured. Stakeholders should also consider what short-term outcomes they hope to achieve and relate them to long-term results. In this way, stakeholders can articulate the relationship between those things they hope to accomplish in the short run with those that are believed to later lead to the achievement of more distal impacts. For example, a program may hope to improve social skills in the short term because they are believed to be related to improving employment or school attendance in the long term. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that whatever outcomes are selected are related to each other and are meaningful in terms of the strategies that are expected to achieve them. Planners may want to consider identifying outcomes for the individuals and families they are serving as well as outcomes that relate to any impact they desire to have on the community or system.

The second broad component of a theory of change involves building an understanding of the relationship among the three elements discussed above and clearly expressing their relationship to one another. At this stage in developing a theory of change, it is necessary to be clear about the expected outcomes in the context of the population to be served and to consider whether the identified strategies can reasonably be expected to accomplish those outcomes for that population. The crucial task is to examine the degree to which planned strategies have the potential to produce the outcomes for the population that has been identified. For example, do the identified strategies match the outcomes in terms of scope, specificity, and time frame? Do strategies address the issues, meet the needs and build upon the strengths of the population of focus? Answering questions such as these will help stakeholders examine the link between the three elements of the theory of change because it prompts an honest assessment of the degree to which planned strategies have the potential to produce the identified outcomes. Understanding the links will enable stakeholders to express what populations of children and families should receive what services and supports in order to achieve what benefits. It is establishing the relationship between these three elements that creates a theory of change. This process also helps systems and programs better understand circumstances under which they can be expected to have primary responsibility for producing certain outcomes and whether there are other contributors and influences that will impact outcomes significantly.

THEORY-BASED FRAMEWORKS

The ideas and intended action for a theory of change can be expressed in the form of a theory-based framework. This is a tool for documenting what strategies are believed to be critical for producing change for children and families. In simplest terms, a framework can be considered a basic structure of ideas that are fitted together and united. The frameworking process requires that participants consider the issues and strengths for the population of focus, consider the guiding principles and components of the strategy, and consider both short and long term outcomes. The resulting framework can provide a foundation to compare the intended approach with what actually occurred as well as serve as a valuable point of reference as the theory is adjusted and changed over time.

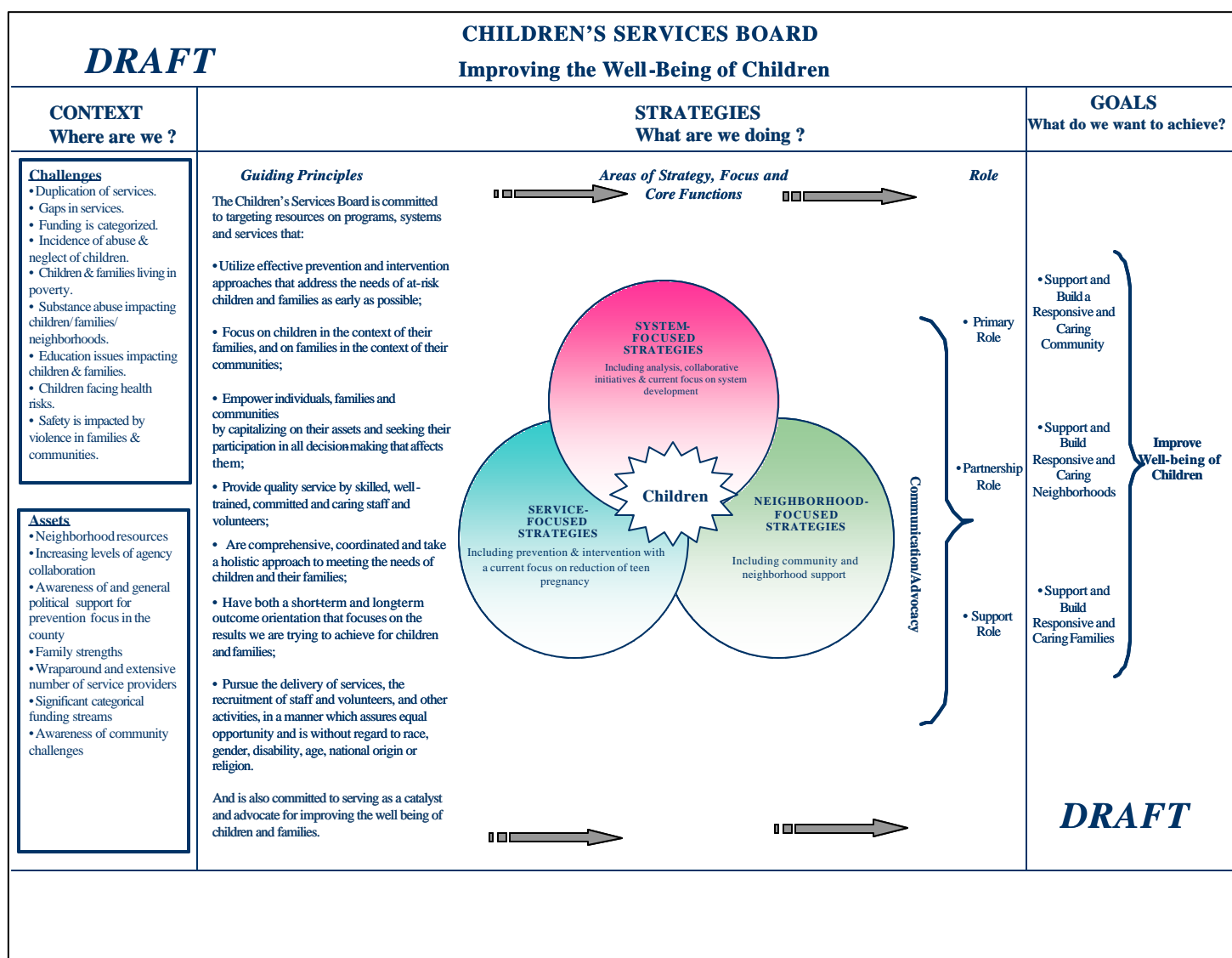


The Process of Framing

The process of framing a theory of change provides a practical and systematic approach for articulating the “Who, What, and Why” of a local plan for service delivery. Anchored within the mission of the system or program, framing helps stakeholders to express their intentions and plans, while establishing critical links between the various aspects of that plan. The framing process sorts a theory of change into three frames that correspond to the three elements of a theory of change: the populations frame, strategies frame and the outcomes frame. The framing process serves several useful purposes. It facilitates the linkage between the three core elements, ensures that individual strategies support the overall strategy, and helps identify any missing pieces. In addition, the framing process can help build consensus among staff and other stakeholders regarding the elements of a theory of change.

Framing is similar to logic modeling in that the process serves as a tool of facilitation. According to the literature (Julian 1997), logic models are useful for both program staff

and evaluators for several reasons. First, logic models can elicit consensus among staff regarding issues that arise during planning efforts. Second, they serve as a heuristic to compare the intended approach with what actually occurred. Third, they facilitate the articulation of specific beliefs about what services and strategies are related to what has been accomplished. Similarly, theory-based frameworks can also be used to elicit consensus, to serve as a heuristic device for participants, and to facilitate the articulation of assumptions and beliefs about what strategies are expected to work. However, in contrast to logic models, which have been perceived by participants as forcing the flow of ideas into a linear structure through a somewhat inflexible or rigid process, theory-based frameworks are designed to provide more flexibility. Theory-based frameworks balance the clarifying of ideas and action with the crucial ability to adapt and adjust the theory of change as circumstances change and evaluation information provides feedback on results.



Framework Levels

An important consideration when building theory-based frameworks is knowing the level at which they must be articulated. These levels range from a broad or macro level, such as a funding organization or a large private provider organization, to the more detailed degree of implementation found at the level of direct service. These levels should be nested or embedded in one another, so that consistency of purpose and strategy across levels can be achieved (Hernandez, Hodges, and Worthington, 2000). This linking of levels to one another assumes that direct service staff should be able to understand how the outcomes they are achieving fit into their larger organization.

In general, frameworks can be developed to represent one of the three levels: macro level, bridge level, and micro level. In complex systems, these three levels are embedded in one another, with the macro level framework representing the broadest conceptualization and operationalization of ideas. In the public sector, this macro level might include strategies designed to develop or maintain an overall community-based system of care. Bridge level theories of change provide explanatory detail to specific strategies within an overall macro level framework. This can include detail for a specific strategy that has been identified in the macro level framework. In addition, the bridge level provides a link between the macro and the program or practice oriented levels that are described in a micro level framework.

The integration of a theory of change across levels of an organization is critical to the successful implementation of a theory-based approach to accountability. Although the degree of specificity will increase as the theory of change moves from the macro to the bridge and from the bridge to the micro level, consistency of purpose should occur throughout an organization from its overall strategy to the strategies of each of its programs and direct services.

The process of linking across levels is called dynamic chaining. The chaining or linking of levels helps achieve consistency of purpose throughout a system or organization. It is important to remember that the process is dynamic because strategies can be adapted or

changed at each of the levels. Understanding that a change at one level can impact the other two levels is critical to producing cohesiveness in the services offered to individual children and families. Particularly in a large organization or comprehensive system of care, dynamic chaining across levels is critical to the successful implementation of theory-based accountability. The clarity that emerges from the macro level theory to the theories that are operational at the micro level of direct services supports consistency of purpose that would be otherwise difficult to achieve. In contrast, simply asking staff at the program level to measure outcomes and be accountable for results without anchoring the process to a broader theory of change can result in inconsistency of purpose and may appear chaotic and confusing to program level personnel. This is especially true when the larger organization is unclear about its theory of change, including population of focus, strategies, and expected outcomes.

The following examples represent three theory-based frameworks that were developed at the macro, bridge and micro levels and reflect the unique nature of effort required at each level. In these examples, the organization has adapted the theory-based framework to address the issues and terminology most relevant to their system or program.

USING THEORY-BASED FRAMEWORKS TO INFORM EVALUATION AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

The availability of evaluation information related to the process and results of service delivery supports continuous improvement efforts, increases responsiveness to those being served, and provides a tool for problem solving that is solution-focused. When timely and regular, such evaluation information provides feedback for making program corrections and allows organizations to pursue innovative approaches to reaching goals (Woodbridge and Huang, 2000). In addition, evaluation information can assist in identifying staff training needs as well as guide budgets and resource allocation. A theory-based approach to accountability is one strategy for developing evaluations that can serve as a guide for program planning and improvement.

Informing Internal Evaluation

One way that theory-based frameworks inform evaluation is by providing guidance in data collection. The framing process used in developing a theory of change serves as a tool for expressing underlying assumptions and expectations about strategies and their outcomes that can guide the kinds of questions the evaluation addresses. Ultimately, evaluation results should help to refine these identified strategies and outcomes based on the changing needs and characteristics of service recipients. According to Patton (1997), “the causal question” in evaluation is whether the implemented program led to the desired outcomes. Using a theory of change, organizations can begin to develop knowledge about causal relationships, by establishing a chain of evidence from populations served to outcomes. Theory-driven internal evaluation should also help those implementing a program to understand the underlying assumptions and expectations that guide their decisions and actions (Patton 1997). According to Patton, planners and practitioners must be willing to put their underlying beliefs and values to the test by bringing them out into the open. The framing process for developing a theory of change can accomplish this while at the same time assisting in the identification of relevant evaluation questions.

The theory-based approach stands in contrast to the more traditional summative evaluations which are frequently designed independently of the systems and programs being evaluated and are intended to provide an assessment of success or failure after completion. Meaningful internal evaluation involves turning the floodlight on the thoughts, expectations, and intentions of program goals and strategies and the identification of information needed to provide useful feedback. In the absence of a framework capturing the beliefs and assumptions that underlie system or program efforts, internal evaluation will suffer.

Another way that theory based frameworks can inform internal evaluation is by addressing the common problem of service delivery strategies and evaluations being developed and implemented independently from one another. Hernandez, Hodges, and Cascardi (1998) suggested that it is the degree to which service delivery and evaluation

processes are engaged with one another that ultimately influences how evaluation information is used to inform service delivery. Others have observed that program management that is directed at improving services is dependent upon this overlap of the evaluation and program planning functions (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Julian and Lyons, 1992). When little or no overlap exists, service planners have difficulty knowing what evaluation questions to ask, how to apply evaluative information, how to identify the elements that are facilitating success, and how to implement needed improvements (Hodges, Hernandez and Nesman 1999). A theory of change provides the opportunity for service delivery and evaluation processes to act in partnership, with each influencing the development of the other (Weiss, 1995).

Strategic Planning

Theory-based frameworks can inform strategic planning by making clear connections between identified goals and strategies and the implementation plans. Strategic planning is a process through which organizations purposefully identify goals and strategies in an effort to make specific plans for implementation. Few would deny the value of good planning. In fact, considerable effort is often put into the process of planning – only to have the resulting plans printed, distributed to stakeholders and placed on a shelf until the next time it is necessary to plan. A significant challenge to planning is ensuring that those plans are living documents and are appreciated by stakeholders as a valuable guide for how to embody the values and accomplish the goals to which they have committed themselves. It is difficult to implement the elements of any plan when ideas are not clearly or adequately conceptualized and operationalized to support action.

Theory-based frameworks can serve as the foundation for strategic planning efforts by keeping them explicitly linked to the population of focus, the strategies believed to lead to desired outcomes and the outcomes that are intended to be accomplished. Once these elements of a theory-based framework and the relationships between them are clearly articulated, stakeholders, including evaluators and planners, have a clearer and more informed understanding of what is expected to be implemented and accomplished. Because dialogue among stakeholders is promoted and a critical review of services is

encouraged, the potential for creative and effective planning is increased (Hernandez, 2000).

In summary, planning efforts can increase in value and impact through the creation of a framework that links ideas to action by expressing the beliefs and assumptions that underlie system or program efforts. In the absence of such a framework, planning efforts are often so fragmented that it is difficult to engage in meaningful planning and decision making. A framework that is grounded in underlying beliefs and assumptions can anchor strategic planning while ensuring that the actual plans are relevant to the articulated wishes of all stakeholders.

Conclusions

Whether the goal is to develop a local system of care or to provide care at the direct service level, strategies that affect change and improve services for children and families are likely to be more effective if they are supported by a unified and well-articulated theory of change. The process of articulating a theory of change facilitates communication and collaboration among stakeholders and reduces the potential for fragmentation among the numerous theories of change that may be in operation at given time. The goal of theory-based accountability is to provide a framework for linking information to action. Well-articulated ideas about the population to be served, critical strategies, and intended outcomes, when linked together, constitute a theory of change.

There are both challenges and opportunities when using theory based frameworks. The challenges include building agreement among people involved in the development of the theory-based framework. This is especially true when there are multiple assumptions and beliefs driving service delivery that have not been made explicit. Articulating a theory of change can be difficult because program management and direct service staff have not always examined their underlying assumptions regarding the services they provide (Weiss, 1995). Thinking through and articulating a system or program's underlying assumptions is critical in guiding stakeholders to critically discuss their practices. This takes time and patience of all of those involved. Another challenge of the theory-based approach to accountability is that consensus around a particular theory of change is not

assurance that expected benefits to the children and families will be achieved. Evaluation information can provide crucial feedback that may lead to a change in strategy and require stakeholders to adapt their hard-fought plans.

In spite of the challenges, rich opportunities are also present. The first is that the careful thinking required to develop a theory-based framework places system or program advocates in a strong position to defend the expenditure of resources. In addition, a theory-based approach contributes to well-focused and efficiently used evaluation resources (Weiss 1995). Finally, the process of building a theory-based framework can build clarity and consensus where it did not exist previously. This allows stakeholders in a system or program to become more consistent in their provision of interventions (Weiss 1995).

In conclusion, theory-based frameworks can become guideposts that help keep program strategies on the desired course (Alter & Murty 1997). The theory-based approach to accountability takes into account the slippage that typically occurs in implementation and uses the theory of change as a stabilizer and anchor. It is easier to know what has changed if thinking about what was planned was clear at the beginning. Being able to compare who was served, what services were provided, and what results were achieved with what was planned in each of those outcome-relevant domains makes stakeholders better able to understand the effectiveness of the strategies they have put into place. In this regard a theory-based framework provides a foundation for the ongoing documentation of changes and allows stakeholders to track progress over time.

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